

[Making the Best of It]

MAKING THE BEST OF IT

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Mr. and Mrs. James Lewis (White)

120 Springdale

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Athens, Georgia

Merchants

Bradley - MAKING THE BEST OF IT

"That coat fits as though it had been made for you. It is a wonderful value. You see it has been marked down below cost and you will be making the mistake of your life[,?] if you don't buy it." The customer viewed herself from every angle in the long mirror.

"Yes, I do like it but even at that price, it's still more than I feel able to pay."

"Well," said the saleslady, "since it is almost Christmas and we are trying to cut down our stock I'll make another reduction in price."

This seemed to satisfy the customer, so slipping off the coat, she said, "Wrap it quick before I change my mind."

"Now can't I show you something else?" said the clerk.

"No, I think I've spent enough for one day."

"Well, I hope you will like your coat, and you certainly have a bargain. Come to see us again soon."

The clerk was Mrs. Hattie Lawton. She and her husband own the J.M. Lawton Cut-Rate Store on Maple Street. It was late one afternoon and near closing time for the day.

As she handed the customer the package, she looked up and saw me.

"Well, hello. Just find a seat over there in the shoe 2 department, and I'll be with you in a minute."

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As I seated myself, Mr. Lawton come from the rear of the store after finishing with a customer.

"We [are?] having a little rush of trade right now. We almost always do at the end of the day. When Miss Hattie gets through, the clerks and I will straighten up stock so she can talk to you. She is a better talker than I am." With this last remark he looks around to see if she is listening.

"Now, Jim," said his wife, "I heard you, but that's all right. Somebody has to talk for the family. I don't know which is worse - to talk too little or too much. My gift-o-gab has certainly helped, more than once, to get us out of a bad situation."

While writing for Mrs. Lawton, I glanced around the store. It was small, but everything was new, up-to-date, and very neat. On the right was an [ar ay?] of ladies' hats, while in the rear of this department was the ladies' ready-to-wear. Racks of dresses and coats were displayed. On the left were gents' clothings, hats, etc. There was a shoe department where gents', ladies', and children's shoes were 'fitted to satisfaction.' While it was not a large department store where you would find the most exclusive patronage, yet the general atmosphere denoted thrift and good management.

The rush of trade being over, Mrs. Lawton came and sat down.

"It has been like this all day," she said, "one steady stream of customers. Yes, trade is real good. Of course, we don't bother with Christmas goods, but it is surprising how much ready-to-wear 3 and shoes we sell for gifts."

Mrs. Lawton is a handsome woman, tall and well proportioned. Her almost white hair, always waved and in place, gives her a rather distinguished appearance. She is kind and obliging, but is decisive in her manner. She enjoys talking and, as she says, is not afraid to speak her mind. Mr. Lawton is the [opposite?]. He is not very tall, nor particularly good looking, but is agreeable and gracious to every one. He never talks much, but always

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smiles and gives [accent?] to everything Miss Hattie says. It is very obvious that she has the stronger personality and more initiative of the two.

“We've had lots of ups and downs, and while lots of people might not like to talk about theirs, I don't mind a bit. In fact, I rather like it. It makes you feel braver and more like you could weather the storms if they should come again. It takes a lot to get me down. I get that from my parents. Oh, I went to tell you about them, and Jim, he never gets tired of hearing me tell of days way back before he knew me. I came from fine old [staunch?] stock who started their married life on the bottom rung of the ladder and built up. I think one thing that's wrong with married people today, they want too much. They don't know a thing about struggling to get a start like our parents did. That's one reason there's so many divorces.

“I was born in a big, two-story log house down in Emanuel County. It would be a valuable house now, since everybody's so crazy about log houses.

“Right after the war my father came down from Virginia to 4 teach a little country school. His ambition was to be a lawyer, but he had to teach and study law awhile. My mother went to school to him. I used to set by the hour and hear them tell about the funny things that happened.

“In those days, they used slates, and he would write notes to her on her slate and put it on her desk. One day he wrote “Miss Florida, I want to take you home after school.’ A little boy saw it and yelled out, ‘I can't read writin', but I'll eat the devil whole, if that's writin'.’ The school trustees heard about it, and told him they would have to quit going together or he could give up his job. So they married.

“We built this log house where three children were born. He carried her there the day they were married. Oh, yes, too, he drove a gray horse, hitched to the first buggy ever seen in that county. He gave an [enfare?] and seventy-two people sat at the table at one time to eat. Sometime when you are out at my house I want to show you some of the exquisite

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silver sent them from relatives in Virginia. They were heirlooms and my mother left them to me. My father's wedding gift to her was a lovely rosewood square piano. That's at one of my sisters in South Georgia.

"After he built this house, he bought 1700 acres of land around it. Got it for a dollar a acre. Today its the richest farming land in that section. He gave the land for Mt. Pisgah Church near [Covena?]. That's the first church I ever attended.

"After they had been married awhile [fater?] decided he would take up his study in law again. So he went to a law school in Virginia. Mother stayed at home and held things together and, 5 young as she was, she ran that farm. Three of us children were born while he was still in school. Mother wove all the cloth we used and even made father's suits of clothes. When he finished law school she made him two suits, one was blue and the other brown. He began his first practice at [Swainsboro?], so mother moved there to put us in school. Father had his first bought suit when he opened his office.

" Until Untill father got established in his practice, mother opened up a little store and also had a little sewing shop in the back. She was certainly a fine, smart woman with plenty of backbone. I guess that's one reason I've been able to stand up under adversities like I have.

"Three more children were born while we were living at [Swainsboro?].

"People back in those days were co-operative. Nobody had much cash money, so when we couldn't pay our bills in cash we paid in produce. I remember my mother sewed to pay for my music lessons. I wanted to get out and make my own living. I always was independent and thought I had good business sense. I had a decided talent for millinery and thought I would take that up, for my lifes work. Someone told me about the [Regensteins?], a wholesale millinery house in Atlanta and suggested that I try to get a job with them. Well, I was fresh from a little country town and had never even been to a place as large as Atlanta but once before in my life. You can imagine how I felt. I had lots

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of nerve though as was not easily discouraged. The first morning I was there I went around to see what my prospects were for a job. I asked for the bossman, went in, told him my name and stated my business.

"Well, said he eyeing me from top to toe, why do you think you can get a job here, have you had any experience?"

I told him I had not but had a love for the work and was willing to learn.

"Well," he said, "We will take you on and give you a chance, but I tell you now you will have to work hard."

"I did work hard and that's no joke. I started at the bottom. My first job was to clean up the work-room and be general handy-man to the other workers. After I had been there awhile, I was allowed to help make hats. Then I was put on the floor as a saleslady. You see Jim, that was another time my ability to talk came in good. My bossman said I had perfectly good sales talk. When they thought I had sufficient training, I was sent over to Athens to take charge of a shop here.

"I had a fine job and saved my money. I was working in Athens, at Smith's at the time of the fire. I don't suppose you were living here then. Well, this whole end of business section was burned to the ground. Of course, my job was gone too, so I went back to the wholesale house in Atlanta. I stayed there a year; then they sent me to Greensboro, North Carolina, to open a hat shop. I really had a swell shop and while I was only on a salary, it was a good one. My living expenses were paid too, by the company, at the very finest hotel. So I managed to save most of my salary.

"I forgot to tell you, when I worked in Athens, I met Jim and was practically engaged to be married. Well, Jim got tired of having to come to Greensboro to see me, so after about a year 7 and a half he persuaded me to give up my job and get married.

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"Jim was well fixed in a financial way so I had nothing to worry about. We had a nice home and for awhile I was happy as could be, just to be a housekeeper. Well, after the novelty of that wore off, I became dissatisfied. I wasn't accustomed to living that kind of a life and was simply dying to get back to public work.

"Finally I persuaded Jim to put our savings together and go in business. We did, and I want you to know we had one of the finest stores ever owned in Athens. We were successful in every way. We didn't owe anything and were able to discount all of our bills for merchandise. We did a credit business, and for long time that worked well. Everybody seemed to have money then and paid their bills.

"We had no children of our own, but that isn't saying we haven't had plenty of experience raising children. You remember my brother Milton, and the trouble he got into down in South Georgia. Well, he ran away and left his family and has never been heard of since. He had three little children, who somebody had to take care of. So we took them, reared them, and gave them good educations. They have turned out well; one of them, the boy, has gone right on up in the business world. He holds one of the finest salaried jobs in this town. I guess it's a blessing we never had any children of our own, since we had these three to rear.

"Jim and I never did go in so-called fashionable society. We don't drink, play cards, or dance. We did, though, belong to the Civic Clubs and were always ready to help with our money any 8 enterprise that was for the good of the town. We are [Staunch?] Methodists and at one time have held responsible offices in the church. We didn't have to work as hard then as now, so we attended church and Sunday School regularly but now I'm so tired on Sunday I've gotten in a terrible habit of staying at home.

"Going back to our business, it prospered and we saved our money, until soon we had a substantial bank account. Then we began making other investments. We bought another home on Bloomfield and moved in it and rented out the one we moved from. Then my

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father had a stroke of paralysis and my mother was quite old, so I moved them to Athens and bought a small home for them, and took care of them until the died.

“The war came on, and like everybody else, we prospered. Merchandise prices went up; in fact, everything was higher but then there was more money.

“After the war was over there was a terrible slump in prices. We had stocked our store with high-priced goods. [Soon?] we realized that it was the same condition with every one. Sales began to fall away and we were faced with the appalling fact that our business was not making expenses. We could not hope to continue unless something was done to tide us over. We lay awake one night, almost all night, trying to decide what we could do. We finally came to the conclusion that the best thing to do was to draw all of our savings from the bank and get our business in better shape. Up until then we had tried to let the store pay its expenses without this.

'the next morning we went to town with our minds made up.

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When we reached the business portion we noticed an unusual number of people on the street for that time of the day. They were standing in groups talking in an excited manner. There was great [consternation?] and agitation written on everyone's faces.

“Jim,” says I, “what in the world so you suppose has happened? Pull over to the curb and park. I just must find out. We stopped the car and almost the first words we heard were ‘Jim, the bank's closed - where did you have your money?’ Jim looked at me and I'll never forget the expression on his face.

“Hattie, what will we do?” he said.

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"Do", say I, "we'll do like everybody else. We'll do the best we can. Now listen here, Jim Lawton, if you think I'm going to let one bank failure get me down you don't know your wife. I'm not so old but what I can make more money. Let's get on to the store.

"Well, that was easier said than done, as I soon began to find out. You know bank failure news spreads like wildfire. Soon our creditors began calling on us. They were nice to us though, and we went ahead with everything almost against us.

"There followed other bank failures and soon the whole town was panicky. People were losing their homes, savings, and investments, and no one seemed to know which way to turn.

"The excitement was too much for Jim, for his heart had been bad for sometime. The next day he had an attack of angina pectoris and the doctors put him to bed for a long period.

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Not only did I have the strain of the business alone, but the anxiety about his condition was enough to floor a braver person than I, but I didn't weaken. I wouldn't even let myself think of my problems, but just lived a day at the time.

"Jim didn't improve very fast, so after talking our problems over with some of our business friends, who were capable of advising. I decided to let the store go. I hated the thought of bankruptcy. I guess I would have profited more in one way by taking that store. I didn't though. I liquidated, and decided to start another business on a smaller scale. We started at the bottom again, but I was willing to do anything to get rid of some of our responsibilities and keep Jim from worrying. Before this, father and mother had both died, so we rented out our lovely home ready furnished and moved into this little cottage I had bought for them.

"This house was not very pretentious but was comfortable and was in a desirable section. We were anxious to get another start in business but where was the capital to come from.

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We had lost everything but the house we were renting out and this one we were living in. We could not borrow any money for the whole country was shaky. We decided to see if we could sell one of these homes, which was doubtful. The better house was bringing good rent so we thought that was too good an investment to let go. We really hoped to be able to live in it again some day. As luck would have it, we heard of an old couple who had a little money and wanted to [buy?] a small house for themselves. We thought our little house would just suit them, so I went to see them.

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"Well, the long and short of it is we made the [sale?] and that is how we got a little cash for our next business venture.

"That sale really left us without a roof over our heads so we had to get busy then and get [?] a place to live. Well I never did have any false pride about me and I was determined that somehow, someway, we were going to get on our feet again. The best beginning I thought was to cut our living expenses down to a [minimum?], so I rented one room right close down town, and moved in. I stored our furniture that we were not using and took just a bed room suite, a few dishes and cooking utensils. In this one room we slept, cooked and ate. Now this [sounds?] mighty poor doesn't it? but you would be surprised to know how comfortable we were and how much we had to eat. I put the car away and didn't use it except to take Jim to the hospital and to [places?] he had to go. He couldn't walk much on account of his heart.

"There was talk then of Athens needing another curb market, so I rented a place and tried that until I could get another start in business. That didn't pan out so well, as there was one here and the competition was too great. So I soon closed that out. Then I conceived the idea of a second-hand clothing store, and that was really the beginning of our recovery from the depression. I rented a building down in a section where rents were cheap and at first [hired?] no help, so there was not much over-head expense to it. Well, my story is getting long so I won't go into detail about that. It was surprising how much I made though.

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People took to that like wildfire. The better class of people liked it 12 because they could sell off their old clothes and the poor liked it because they could buy cheap. I bought and sold everything from [hose?] to evening dresses. I had some real good things too. You would open your eyes if you know how many college boys would come in and sell off their clothes. Perfectly good clothes too. They would get in a tight for spending money. I would hate to buy them, for I couldn't begin to pay the worth of them.

"I bought another store on Main Street. It was not a second-hand one but only catered to the poorer class of people. Jim had gotten able to work again. so he took charge of that one. We had both stores then. After about four years, we sold out both of these stores and invested in this one. We are really proud of this store and we feel that we are really on a good solid foundation once more.

"Of course it cost more to operate this store than it did the other ones. When we first opened up Jim and I tried to run it without any help. Now that was real work, and at times I would get so tired I could hardly go. I was still preparing our meals at home. That soon proved to be too hard for me, so we began eating our lunch down town. Jim would go out and get his and have mine sent here to the store.

"Trade soon got so big we couldn't handle it, so we got us one extra clerk for Saturdays. Then another, a man in the men's and boy's side. Soon we took on a regular full time clerk and she has been with us a long time. Of course there are busy seasons, like Christmas, Easter and the fall when we have to have lots of 13 help but we are trying to keep down over-head expenses as much as possible. I certainly do work hard though. I still can't let Jim be worried with much responsibility so I go ahead with everything and don't worry him much.

"[Business?] prospered so, we decided we could begin to live a little less crowded so we moved back into our home on South Street. We have the second floor rented out and that helps to pay for the upkeep out there."

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About this time Mr. Lawton walks up.

"Well, Miss Hattie," he says, "have you told it all. You have been talking a long time."

"Now, Jim, maybe you had better talk awhile, I may have left out something."

"Not me," he replied, "you know I'm not much of a talker."

"Look, Jim," said Mrs. Lawton, looking out the door, "[see?] that woman passing out there with her arms full of bundles - she is the one that owes us that great big bill. That's why she doesn't come in [here?] any more. I bet she didn't get those packages on credit. There's not a soul in this town I would credit again."

"Back to my story - I wasn't so popular when I had my second-hand store down on a side street. Not even in the church. Success certainly does make a difference. People's eyesight must be improving since we opened up this new store. They seem to see us at further distance to speak to us than they could before. That doesn't bother me though as long as we can pay our debts."

"Oh, of course now that we are getting on our feet and have more money to spend, our so-called friends are coming around to see us more. We are invited to join this, that, and the other [organisation?], but I can't be bothered. I hope I'm not getting selfish, but I [have?] had such a struggle, not only financially, but other ways, I'm just tired I think. I'm not dependent on other people for my happiness anyway."

"I have a lot to be proud of. We are out of debt, we have a nice growing business, and even though Jim is not entirely well, if he takes care of himself there's no reason why he should not live a long, long time. Why, I've paid out over a thousand dollars in doctors bills and medicine in the past two years. I have good paidup insurance too that will come in mighty fine in our old age. We won't ever be wealthy as the world counts money, but we have enough."

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"We are public spirited too and always vote our [convictions?]. We do our part in our church, and our pocketbooks are open for every worthy cause.

"I think a lot about that song you sing for us so much. Jim, you know the one you are so crazy about. The name of it is "Heart O Mine" - and the last verse goes. 'For we know not every [sorrow?] can be sad, So forgetting all the sorrow we have had, Let us dry away our tears, And put by our foolish fears, And through all the coming years, Just be glad!'

Well, that's what we are trying to do now, Just Be Glad."